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RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS PRIORITY 7672
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 1605
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1456
RUEHNC/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT PRIORITY 0995
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1923
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT PRIORITY 8551
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI PRIORITY 0237
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA PRIORITY 4225
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUCPDOG/USDOC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000386

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EEB/TRA/AN (FINSTON) AND NEA/MAG (HARRIS)
STATE PASS USTR (BURKHEAD)
USDOC FOR ITA/MAC/ONE (NATHAN MASON), ADVOCACY CTR (REITZE)
CASABLANCA FOR FCS (ORTIZ)
CAIRO FOR FINANCIAL ATTACHE (SEVERENS)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/17/2018
TAGS: [ECON](#) [EAIR](#) [ETRD](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: MINISTER OF TOURISM READY FOR OPEN SKIES

REF: A. TUNIS 282 (AND PREVIOUS)
[1](#)B. 07 TUNIS 1224

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) During an April 17 meeting, Minister of Tourism Khelil Lajimi offered his support, and assistance, in moving forward on the proposed Open Skies Agreement. Lajimi emphasized his desire to increase tourism from the United States and acknowledged the importance of a direct flight link to achieving this goal. He noted that the February kidnapping of two Austrian nationals (Ref A) by al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) had not negatively impacted tourism and that there had been a double digit increase in Austrian tourists. Lajimi became Minister of Tourism during a September 2007 cabinet reshuffle, moving from his position as Secretary of State in the Ministry of Development and International Cooperation (Ref B). End Summary.

"We Need Direct Flights"

[1](#)2. (SBU) During an April 17 meeting, Minister of Tourism Khelil Lajimi emphasized his support for an Open Skies Agreement and stated that "we need a direct flight link." Lajimi lamented the small number of American tourists that visit Tunisia each year -- 15,000 -- and stressed the importance of a direct flight on boosting tourism from the United States. Ambassador told Lajimi that we have already offered to begin negotiations on an Open Skies Agreement. Lajimi said he is ready to work with Minister of Transport Abderrahim Zouari on the topic and offered to speak to Zouari directly. Laughing, he noted that he is already "pushing" Zouari for Open Skies with Europe, acknowledging that Moroccan tourism had overtaken Tunisia in part due to the

availability of flights operated by budget carriers from Europe.

No Fallout from al-Qaeda Kidnapping

13. (SBU) When asked if there had been any negative impact following the February kidnapping of two Austrian nationals by al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Ref A), Lajimi stated that the latest statistics actually showed double digit growth in tourism from Austria. (Note: Lajimi did not specify the time period over which the increase occurred. End Note.) He added that he had just hosted an Austrian delegation interested in investing in Tunisia's tourism sector. Acknowledging his own surprise, he surmised that the event had put Tunisia in the headline in Austria, perhaps illustrating that there is no such thing as bad publicity. Lajimi reiterated the GOT position on the Austrian kidnapping, emphasizing that "everyone knows they were not kidnapped in Tunisia."

Lajimi: Next Generation of Tunisian Leadership

14. (C) Khelil Lajimi became Minister of Tourism during a September 2007 cabinet reshuffle (Ref B), moving from his position as Secretary of State at the Ministry of Development and International Cooperation (MDIC). During the meeting, Lajimi, a fluent English-speaker, was gregarious, laid-back and open -- a marked difference from the formality often on display by other Tunisian ministers. He stressed the

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importance of dialogue and regular contact, stating that by "keeping in touch we can overcome many issues." He displayed an impressive command not only of the tourism portfolio, but of world news and current events, at one point noting the recent Northwest-Delta merger and the US - Europe Open Skies Agreement. At the age of 45, Lajimi is the youngest GOT minister, with Mohamed Nouri Jouini, Minister for Development and International Cooperation, the only other minister of the next generation. A graduate of the prestigious National School of Administration (ENA) in Paris, Lajimi is a career civil servant, previously serving in the Ministry of Economy (a precursor to MDIC), Ministry of Industry and Energy, as well as CEO of the state-owned Tunisian Iron and Steel Industry Company.

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